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AUTHOR Mayer-Guell, Ann M.
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ABSTRACT

One of the main problems faced by an organizational communication instructor at Southern Methodist University was how to incorporate experiential learning into her survey course without jeopardizing precious class time. After careful consideration, she came up with a course design that she felt would not only provide students with experiential learning but would also add to classroom discussions. The course she designed is organized around one central experiential learning project. The project is divided into a number of component assignments that all work toward the final product, an organizational analysis paper of about 20-25 pages, and the component assignments include: an organizational summary, a field journal, two progress reports, classroom discussions and presentations, and the final analysis paper. After the organizational analysis project is introduced each student is required to go out and find an organization to study for the rest of the semester, and the field journal must be kept on that organization. Complete information on the course is attached. (NKA)

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Exploring the Field: Incorporating Field Research into the Organizational Communication Survey Course

Ann M. Mayer-Guell
Division of Arts Administration & Corporate Communications
Southern Methodist University
P.O. Box 750113
Dallas, TX 75272-0113
Email: amayergu@mail.smu.edu
Phone: 214-768-3028
Fax: 214-768-4780

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A.M. Mayer-Guell

CS 510 448

. . . how much keener and more extensive our observations and ideas would be if we formed them under conditions of a vital experience which required us to use judgement: to hunt for the connection of the thing dealt with. (Dewey, 1916, p. 143)

As a college educator, I'm always looking for ways to engage my students, to get them excited about the subject we are studying and to provide them a means by which to "experience" the material. Consistent with the quote above by Dewey, I am a firm believer that students learn more when they have experiences that illustrate theory and concepts and provide them with an opportunity to connect ideas especially across disciplines. Providing these learning opportunities has always been easier in some of my classes than in others. In my intercultural communication course I conduct simulations of intercultural encounters. I also have students write experiential papers where they are required to have a significant interaction with a co-culture that they do not belong to and then write about that experience and how it relates to the material being covered in class. In my research methods course, I have them learn SPSS using real-world data so they can make sense out of something that appears to be a bit more than numbers on a page. Sometimes I even have them use the most recent data I have collected if it may be of interest to them.

But then there is my organizational communication course. I've always had difficulties providing hands-on experience in this survey course that wouldn't overwhelm my students and wouldn't prevent me from covering the breadth and depth of the topic. However, as my department at Southern Methodist University became more and more involved in experiencial learning, I realized that I needed to find some way to engage my students above and beyond the classroom experiences I could provide despite the difficulties this type of course structure might bring. One of the main problems I faced was how to incorporate such an experience without

jeapordizing precious class time. The material covered in the organizational communication survey course is immense and I didn't want to eliminate depth of discussion or breadth of material covered. However, after some careful consideration I came up with a course design that I felt would not only provide students with experiential learning but would also add to our classroom discussions. In this paper, I would like to describe the design I use for my organizational communication course in hopes that others may be empowered to include experiential learning in this extensive course.

My organizational communication course is organized around one central experiential learning project. The project is divided up into a number of component assignments that all work towards the final product, an organizational analysis paper of about 20-25 pages. The component assignments include: an organizational summary, a field journal, two progress reports, classroom discussion and presentations, and the final analysis paper. Each of the assignments is designed to be a part of or lead up to later assignments. For example, observations and analysis of those observations made in their field journals are incorporated into progress reports. Students are able to include the organizational summary and portions of each progress report in their final analysis. Therefore, there is some motivation for doing each of the assignments well—it saves students precious time at the end of the term. The course is also designed so that each of the organizational analysis assignments is integrated into class discussions and lectures. Although I set aside a day for in-depth discussion for each progress report, a good portion of our discussion of their projects happens on a day-to-day basis as we use their research to illustrate ideas from lecture. Each week students are given a list of concepts/ideas they are to explore in their organizations. Their observations are then used as a basis for discussion the next week. Therefore, during lecture I can ask for examples of concepts

like gatekeeping or hierarchy and students typically have a number of examples from which we can learn. In this way I feel the course continues to move forward through the material while still incorporating field experiences and allowing students to make connections between theory and practice.

I begin my course as I always have, with an introduction to the field of organizational communication. For the first week, I provide the foundation for the rest of the term, but by the end of the first week I introduce the organizational analysis project. At that point they are required to go out and find an organization to study for the rest of the semester. The organizations students select vary greatly. Most pick an organization with which they already have a connection. Some study campus organizations, their sorority/fraternity, a church youth group, the organization where they hold an internship or part-time job, etc. Some are courageous enough to find an organization that interests them but with which they have no previous connection. By the end of the second week of the term, the first of the component assignments related to their field study is due. In this first assignment, students are required to write a summary of the organization they have selected to study. The summary includes information such as what the organization does, how it is organized, their role in the organization, how they "got in" to the organization, how much contact time they will have with the organization and who their primary contact is. They also have to gain permission for their study from the organization.

After their summaries are written we turn to theoretical perspectives and methods of field research. These topics were typically covered at the end of the term in my previous organizational communication courses, but given that they need these ideas to begin their actual research, I move them up considerably. Over the course of a few class meetings, I have the

students articulate their theoretical perspective (functional, interpretive, critical) and their method of research. Given their time constraints and lack of research skills, most choose to employ participant observation (and I encourage this method of research). However, I typically have a few students who have already taken research methods and choose to conduct a survey or more advanced forms of research.[1] During these class meetings we also discuss how to keep a systematic field journal. Students are taught how to write down observations on one side of the page and their interpretations and analysis of those observations on the other. These journals are used frequently in class discussions and students are required to bring them to class. In that way, they begin to see the usefulness of the journal writing exercise and tend to keep their journals up to date.

Once they understand the importance of the field journal and have started conducting participant observations in their organizations, I give them lists of questions to be thinking about each week during their fieldwork. The questions for the week typically deal with the lectures coming up the following week or they function to make sure students are observing the fundamental components of the organization. Without these questions, some students flounder around in their organizations as they try to figure out what they should be looking for; the questions provide some focus and structure to their research. Some of the questions that I ask students to address in their field journal are adapted from Stanton (1981). Some of the questions include:

1. What type of organizational structure is in place?
2. Is the structure indicative of informal influence in the organization? Why/Why not?
3. What are the goals of your organization?
4. Is there agreement among employees as to the organization's goals?

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[1] I work with these students on a one-to-one basis throughout the rest of the term.

5. What is the formally established communication network in your organization? How is communication suppose to flow in your organization?
6. How does communication really flow in your organization?
7. What role does the informal communication network and grapevine play in your organization?
8. What communication network roles do see in play around you?
9. How are decisions made in your organization? (structures and processes)
10. What relationship exists between decision-making structure/process and the organizational structure of the organization?
11. What type of leadership exists in your organization?
12. How efficient is your organization in meeting its goals? What hinders or helps this efficiency?
13. How effective is your organization in meeting its goals? What could make your organization more effective?
14. What role does communication play in reaching your organization's goals?

The next, and arguably the most crucial step, is to integrate the answers to these questions into the classroom experience. This is done in a variety of ways. One of the primary ways this occurs is through simple question and answer. To each of my lectures I have added time in to request examples from the students. Typically there are more examples than we can explore, but the discussion brings theory and practice closer together.

The experiential learning projects are also integrated into the classroom through the discussion of progress reports and student presentations. I set aside a day of class to discuss their research projects everytime a progress report is due. I have them discuss their projects in small

groups of 3–4 students. I use the same small groups throughout the term so that the students become familiar with one another's work and can provide meaningful feedback. These small groups are also responsible for presenting material to the class every once in awhile. Instead of lecturing everyday, I often give an overview of the material to be covered and then have the class break out into their small groups to discuss certain topics. The small groups then present back to the class what they have discussed and are usually required to incorporate observations from their fieldwork of the phenomenon of discussion that day.

The final piece of work the students turn in on their organizational analysis project is their final paper. At first, my students usually feel a bit overwhelmed by the length of the paper, so I break it down into sections so they can see the where their previous work fits in and where there are gaps to be filled. Their final paper includes the following sections:

1. An introduction outlining their paper and its argument/thesis
2. A description of the organization of study
3. An overview of the theories/concepts used to support their argument (a mini review of literature)
4. A description of data collection methods and general observations made
5. A discussion of their argument using examples from their journals and supporting theories/concepts as evidence
6. A conclusion.

By breaking the paper out as outlined above, the final paper appears much more feasible for students. The format also starts them in the direction of writing academic papers at the graduate level.[2]

[2] I teach this course as an upper division elective, so the format of this final paper may be inappropriate for a lower-division organizational communication survey course.

Despite the changes I have made to this course, there are still some associated difficulties with it. One of the primary disadvantages is that this design is time-consuming for the instructor and student alike. It takes a lot of energy on the part of the student to keep up with the project in the midst of their busy schedules and it take a lot of commitment on the part of the instructor especially at the end of the term when students typically need a lot of individualized help putting together their final analysis paper. This added work for students sometimes results in their being resentful. I combat this by talking about the benefits of the project in terms of academic understanding but also in terms of practical experience. Motivating students is also a difficulty. They need a lot of encouragement to keep up with their journals, to spend enough time in their organizations and to keep up with their written assignments. Once the course is over they are usually grateful for the experience, but this is not often the case during the experience. The last difficulty I generally have is getting students to be able to articulate their theoretical perspective and understand research methods so early on in the term. In my previous course design these topics were taught at the end of the term when the students had more context. Moving it up to the very beginning of the term means one must spend more time explaining the context than one would have to at the end of the term.

Despite these difficulties, there are many benefits. First and foremost, this experiential learning exercise provides students with real-world examples that they can apply to what they are learning in the classroom. I'm always delighted when a student is able to make the connection between their experience and theories and concepts from class. They tend to increase their understanding of the event as well as the theory or concept. Another benefit of this project is that it offers an opportunity to introduce the concept of field research. This is especially beneficial for those students planning on advancing to graduate work but it is also beneficial for

those planning on pursuing careers in consulting. One primary benefit for the instructor is that students are able to read the text(s) with some sort of context. Too often we teach students organizational concepts with no context since many have never really worked in an organizational setting. Students are able to make connections between what they are reading and their own world. Students begin to read out of curiosity and for the love of learning rather than for the mere purpose of passing an exam.

What I have attempted to demonstrate how experiential learning can be incorporated into the undergraduate organizational communication survey course. Experiential learning is not often used in this particular course due to time constraints created by the breadth and depth of the topic to be covered during the term. However, a successful incorporation of field research into the basic organizational communication course can create a unique learning opportunity for the students and provide a greater context for learning within the classroom.

Organizational Communication
Corporate Communications & Public Affairs 5301
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Professor: Dr. Ann M. Mayer-Guell
Office: 220 Umphrey Lee
Phone: 214-768-3028
Email: amayergu@mail.smu.edu
Office Hours: T/TH 2-3:30pm or by appointment
Class Meets: MWF 11-11:50

Required Texts

Byers, P.Y. (1997). Organizational Communication: Theory and Behavior. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Neher, W. W. (1997). Organizational Communication: Challenges of Change, Diversity, and Continuity. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Other Required Readings (on Library Reserve)

Barker, J. (1993). Tightening the iron cage: Concertive control in self-managing teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 38(3), 408-437.

Barley, S. R., & Kunda, G. (1992). Design and devotion: Surges of rational and normative ideologies of control in managerial discourse. Administrative Science Quarterly, 37, 363-399.

DeWine, S. (1994). The Consultant's Craft: Improving Organizational Communication. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Stohl, C. (1995). Organizational Communication: Connectedness in Action. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Course Description

The primary purpose of this course is to introduce you to the field of organizational communication by acquainting you with communication and organizational theories and concepts. These theories and concepts will provide you with a background that will enable you to conceptually understand and analyze communication behavior as it occurs in organizational contexts. The course will also cover current issues related to organizational communication such as gender issues in the workplace, communication ethics, cultural diversity, and communication technologies. Throughout the semester you will work on a field research project that will allow you to apply the theories and concepts you have learned to an actual organization.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Compare and contrast organizational theories and their implications for communication as it occurs in organizations.
2. Explain communication theories and processes as they relate to the organizational context.
3. Conceptually understand and critically analyze communication behavior in organizational contexts.
4. Understand the general process of conducting organizational communication field research.

Course Policies

1. You are expected to participate in all class discussions. In order to do this you will need to thoroughly read all assignments **before** coming to class.
2. You are expected to attend all classes. You are allowed five absences for the entire term. I do not differentiate between excused and unexcused absences. For every absence above and beyond five, your final course grade will be reduced by 10%.
3. Tardiness is not acceptable since it is disruptive and disrespectful to the entire class. Habitual tardiness will result in your being marked absent. (Two tardies equals one absence.)
4. You are expected to act and speak in a respectful manner at all times. If I deem your behavior to be disrespectful to me or to any of your classmates, you will be asked to leave the classroom (or my office) immediately, and this behavior will negatively impact your final course grade.
5. All assignments are due at the **beginning of the class period** on the day they are due. Late assignments **will not** be accepted for credit. If a student is going to be absent the day that an assignment is due, alternative arrangements for turning in the assignment must be made in advance.
6. All assignments must be typed, double-spaced and use a 12-point type. All margins must be set at 1 inch and all pages numbered.
7. All research must conform to the APA or MLA style.
8. I reserve the right to add assignments and/or change assignment specifics, due dates or exam dates at any time. Changes will be announced in class. Students are responsible for getting this information if they miss a class for whatever reason.
9. The University Honor Code will be strictly upheld. Any violation of the SMU Honor Code through plagiarism, copying another's work, or cheating on an exam (please see the SMU Honor Code for further information about what constitutes a violation) will be referred to the Honor Council for review and possible disciplinary action on behalf of the university. At a minimum, you will receive a zero for the assignment.
10. Failure to cite all sources in any of your work is considered plagiarism and will be immediately referred to the Honor Council. You **must** cite your source regardless if you used a quote, paraphrased, or merely summarized another's work. Please see the Learning Enhancement Center if you are unsure about what to cite and/or how to cite it.
11. If a class needs to be canceled due to inclement weather, consult my office voicemail.

12. Any student with documented learning disabilities should contact me during the first week of class if special provisions are requested.

Organizational Analysis Project (Field Research)

Task One: Choose an Organization to Study

Every student will pick an organization for analysis during the first two weeks of the term. You may or may not be a member of this organization. However, you should have contact with members of your organization of study at least once or twice a week. Organizations you might choose to analyze include: a University club, a church youth group, your sorority/fraternity, the organization in which you are employed, etc. You will be following your organization throughout the semester and reporting on it frequently during class discussions. If you choose to analyze an organization to which you do not belong, you must obtain permission from that organization prior to commencing your research. Hint: Choosing an organization that you have easy access to (or can get easy access to) and one that interests you will make this project all the more enjoyable.

Task Two: Write a Summary of the Organization

On September 3rd, a 1-2 page summary of your organization of study is due. This summary should detail the following information about your organization: type of organization, purpose of the organization, your current role in the organization (if you are a member), how you got involved with the organization, positions/roles you have had (if applicable), and your level of involvement and amount of contact with the organization. Include any other information you deem relevant.

Task Three: Keep a Journal

Throughout the semester, I expect you to keep a journal of activities/events/observations of your organization. Write down anything and everything that you think is interesting or noteworthy. Keep track of what you observe, your impressions of the organization and its activities, your activities within the organization, the people you meet, etc. You may find it useful to draw a vertical line down the middle of every page in your journal. On one side record your observations and on the other side record your reactions, analysis or feelings about the observations.

Your journal will be particularly useful in writing your progress reports and absolutely necessary for writing your final paper. KEEP YOUR JOURNAL CURRENT. I can guarantee you that you will not remember significant details from the beginning of the term by the time you write your final paper unless you WRITE THEM DOWN. In order to encourage you to keep your journal up-to-date, I will ask you to bring it to class periodically for use during group discussions.

Task Four: Inform the Class of Your Progress

You will be required to write progress reports periodically during the semester (see course schedule for specific dates). These 4-6 page progress reports are intended to keep you constantly thinking about your organizational analysis, to prepare you for our class discussions of our

projects, to help you apply what you are learning in class to your organization of study and to help you formulate your final paper. Both of these progress reports should include the following information: How your research is progressing, a description of any problems you are having and what assistance, if any, you need to solve them, and a discussion of how 3-5 specific theories or concepts covered in class relate to the organization you are studying. In addition, the second progress report should also talk about what aspect of your organization you think you are going to focus on in your final paper and the theories and concepts you are planning to include in your analysis.

Task Five: Write Your Final Analysis Paper

Your final analysis paper is due on December 3rd. This 20-25 page paper should include the following sections:

7. An introduction outlining your paper and its argument/thesis
8. A description of the organization you studied
9. An overview of the theories/concepts you are going to use to support your argument (a review of literature)
10. A description of your data collection/observation methods
11. A discussion of your argument using examples from your journal your supporting theories/concepts as evidence
12. A conclusion.

All papers must be typed, double-spaced, and use 12-point type and either the MLA or APA style.

Your entire organizational analysis project is worth 400 points. These points are broken down as follows:

Organizational Summary	25
Progress Report I	75
Progress Report II	100
Final Paper	200
Total points:	400

Grading

The following table lists every assignment and its allotted points. Your grade will be based solely on these assignments. No extra credit will be given.

Assignment	Points
Test I	175
Test II	175
Test III (Final Exam)	250
Organizational Analysis Project	400
Total points:	1000

Grading Scale

Total Points	Grade
925-1000	A
900-924	A-
875-899	B+
825-874	B
800-824	B-
775-799	C+
725-774	C
700-724	C-
675-699	D+
625-674	D
600-624	D-
0-599	F

Tentative Course Schedule

Date	Topic	Assignments
8/23	Course overview	
Foundations of Organizational Communication		
8/25	The Changing World of Organizational Communication; Communication ethics	Neher, Chpt. 1; Byers, Chpt. 4
8/27	Cultural Diversity	Byers, Chpt. 11
8/30	Field of Organizational Communication	Neher, Chpt. 2; Byers, Chpt. 1 (pp. 3-8)
9/1	Communication Theory	Neher, Chpt. 3; Byers, Chpt. 1 (pp. 9-19).
9/3	Discussion of Organizational Analysis Projects	**Summary of Organization due**
9/6	No Class—Labor Day	
9/8	Assessing Organizational Communication	Neher, Chpt. 13
9/10	Assessing Organizational Communication Continued	*DeWine, Chpts. 4 & 5
Organizational Theories and Their Impact on Organizational Communication		
9/13	Overview of Organizational Theory	Byers, Chpt. 1(pp. 19-38)
9/15	Classical and Scientific Management	Neher, Chpt. 4
9/17	Human Relations & Human Resource Development	Neher, Chpt. 5
9/20	System and Contingency Theories	Neher, Chpt. 6 and 9
9/22	Discussion of Organizational Analysis Projects	**Progress Report I due**
9/24	Comparisons of Organizational Theories	*Barley & Kunda article
9/27	TEST I	

Date	Topic	Assignments
Organizational Life and Special Topics in Organizational Communication		
9/29	Organizational Culture	Neher, Chpt. 7; Byers, Chpt. 8
10/1	Organizational Culture Continued	
10/4	Organizational Creation and Evolution	Byers, Chpt. 9
10/6	Communication Channels and Networks	Neher, Chpt. 8; Byers, Chpt. 2
10/8	Communication Networks Continued	*Stohl, Chpt. 2
10/11	No class—Fall Break	
10/13	No class—Dissertation Defense	
10/15	Communication Technology and Media	Byers, Chpt. 13
10/18	Virtual Organizations	
10/20	Nonverbal Communication	Byers, Chpt. 3
10/22	Interpersonal Communication	Neher, Chpt. 9
10/25	Leadership Communication	Neher, Chpt. 10; Byers, Chpt. 5
10/27	Leadership Communication Continued.	
10/29	Discussion of Organizational Analysis Project	**Progress Report II due**
11/1	Exam Review	
11/3	TEST II	
11/5	No Class—NCA Convention	
11/8	Decision-making Teams/Groups	Neher, Chpt. 11
11/10	Organizational Conflict/Conflict Management	Byers, Chpt. 6
11/12	Conflict Management Continued	
11/15	Public Communication	Neher, Chpt. 12
11/17	Persuasion	Byers, Chpt. 7
11/19	Issues in Organizational Communication	Neher, Chpt. 14
11/22	Gender Issues	Byers, Chpt. 10
11/24	Cultural Diversity Revisited	Byers, Chpt. 11
Date	Topic	Assignments
11/26	No class—Thanksgiving Break	
11/29	Organizational Consulting	Byers, Chpt. 12
12/1	The Future of Org Comm	Byers, Chpt. 14
12/3	Course Wrap-up/Final Review	**Final Papers Due**
12/8	FINAL EXAM (8-11 am)	

*On reserve at Fondren Library.

Works Cited

Dewey, J. (1916). Democracy and Education. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Stanton, T. K. (1991). Discovering the ecology of human organizations: Exercises for field study students. In L. Borzak (ed), Field Study: A Sourcebook for Experiential Learning (pp. 208-225). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.